ALSO BY GAYL JONES

FICTION

Corregidora (novel) (1975)
Eva's Man (novel) (1976)
White Rat (short stories) (1977)
The Healing (novel) (1998)
Mosquito (novel) (1999)
Palmares (novel) (2021)
The Birdcatcher (novel) (2022)

POETRY COLLECTIONS

Song for Anninho (1981)
The Hermit-Woman (1983)
Xarque and Other Poems (1985)
Selected Poems: Unwelcome and Song for Anninho (2022)

OTHER WORKS

Chile Woman (play) (1974)
Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature (criticism) (1991)

BUTTER

NOVELLAS, STORIES, AND FRAGMENTS

GAYL JONES

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SHUGER'S WIFE

1.

I've darkened in the Caribbean sun and now I'm the color of polished mahogany and like in Walter Roberts's poem "I ride the white sea horses onto the beach," and it's good to charge from the ocean, into the leaning palms, and to laugh into the sun.

My husband's brought me here to the Caribbean, to an island that the tourists haven't discovered yet, and so I won't give you its name. Even in postcards, I don't name it, and the postcards are always posted from the mainland.

Those who have known me on other islands might say that here I've begun to glow.

We've rented a small house that's separated from the sea by a forest. It's curious that my husband's chosen such a house, but he insists that it's the only rentable house, and anyway, he says, it's not separated from the sea by a true forest but only an accumulation of trees. If you knew him, you wouldn't be surprised by his vocabulary. Mine is more simple and straightforward. I know a forest when I see one. And I know the forest from the trees.

I've come to the seaside. I, like all the others, cannot deny the sea. Another poet said so. Perhaps it was Lamming who

said you remember it, always. Anyway, a true poet said so. It must have been Lamming. Even a stranger here, even those from lands without seashores, or even rivers, are drawn to the sea. If I were a poet, I'd hunt for metaphors, or symbolism, but the sea seems to be its own metaphor, its own symbolism.

I take a book with me, one that my husband presented me with: Don Steele's *Symbolism and Modernity*. It is written in the sort of language my husband uses. There is an essay on Hesse's "Der Dichter." I must get my husband to translate the German. He says the author has written other books, not just aesthetics.

There is one on the economic philosophy of Malcolm X and another . . . "I must get you the other books . . . The true meaning . . ." he starts to say, then he quotes from one of the essays:

> The symbolists believed like ancient magicians that words possessed a power to control nature. Each natural force had a secret word to which it was enslaved, and the possessor of the word could control that force, like "abracadabra." Theoretically, one could by mere words control the planets and stars. Poetry was viewed at the apex of words. The poet was the seer, the high priest, capable with his musical chants of bringing down the mountains. Whether any poet, priest or magician has ever accomplished anything resembling such a structure of words to perform miraculous feats is for us here moot.
>
> What is indisputable, however, is that words do have a powerful effect on human emotions and in history. Words can produce sublimity, laughter, cheers, smiles and love. Or, words can produce pain, fear, hatred, melancholy and death. Words can transcend time and picture life thousands of years ago. Words can transform space and picture life on the other side of earth from where one stands.

A sea turtle, on the white sand, near my feet, is in its shell, dreaming.

I daydream.

2.

One can be as corrupted by islands as anything. "If I'm set on getting islands, others are set on worse," says Sancho. My favorite author used to be Cervantes, and I wasn't content to read him in translation. I insisted on learning the original, uncorrupted Spanish.

As for me, perhaps it's only the paradises that corrupt, or what we presume to be the paradises. I'm not set on getting islands, really. If you're born on islands like these, they say, you see the island differently, you view it differently. Islanders, they say, want to escape the island to the mainland. Is the mainland, then, their paradise? If I were born here, perhaps the sea would not amaze and entice me. I wouldn't paint it or try to get its true tones. I wouldn't gather scavenger objects from the beaches to form into sculptures.

3.

In the evening, Sugar and I—sometimes I call him Sugar, not Shuger—are getting dressed to meet friends at a local pub. They call them pubs here. One friend's a movie extra and the other's a poet. Not a poet I've read. But my husband seems to know all the writers I've never read. He doesn't know them all personally. He collects their books. In the bar—I prefer to call it a bar—I drink warm beer. The movie extra, who's never had a speaking part and insists she doesn't want one, insists she prefers being an extra, is silent. But the poet is very talkative. He asks me, "How does one state the whole truth and remain poetic?" At first I think he's speaking to my husband, because it's a question for my husband, not for me.

I don't answer. I pretend I'm a movie extra. I sip the warm beer and watch a few early lovers dance. I hum to the music, but I'm somewhere behind the beat.

Perhaps it's a rhetorical question. Perhaps I'm not expected to answer.

"Were you born on this island?" I ask him finally.

"No, not this one. But another one. One quite like it. One very much the same."

"I've been to Cat Island," I say.

"Yes, Shuger told me you trekked there."

And then he quotes me from one of his own poems.

Something between the empire and home, in an unpoetical time. I suppose to everyone, their age and time seem unpoetical. The more you learn of history. The more you know.

I listen, but I'm unsure of the rhythms of this place. I'm either behind the beat or ahead of it. I can tell that he's as preoccupied with metaphors as my husband, Shuger (that's his last name; he says it was originally spelled Shuyger, but an ancestor changed the spelling; I don't know if that's true ancestral history). Anyway, Shuger pours more beer for me from an orange pitcher, holding the pitcher by only one of its ears.

"Anyway, here's the book I told you about," says my husband, and hands him a copy of Kambon Obayani's *Island of Song*.

My husband likes to present books as gifts. That's his favorite type of gifting. His first gift to me was a book. An autographed copy of a book by Gwendolyn Brooks.

I want to ask this poet whether he too has seen the white sea horses, but I don't. The moon peeks through the window at us. We stay in the pub till the birds wake up and the sun rises out of a cavern of stars.

4.

Walking back on the beach in the sand, I ask whether the hoofprints I see are the hoofprints of mules.

"They're the hoofprints of memory," says the poet.

Then he chants:

Listen to the grass, the ping-pong drums,
The wul'

The movie extra is silent and Shuger is holding me by the waist.

"Wul'?" I whisper.

"World," he says. "That's how my people pronounce 'world.'"

I say nothing. I think of Margaret Walker Alexander's *For My People*. I see a sea turtle and wonder if it's the same one I saw early in the day. Now it's not sleeping but rushing seaward, as turtles rush, scrambling the sand.

Shuger and I enter what I insist is a forest, while the others continue up the beach.

Although Shug is scientifically minded, he collects the poetry of Black men, their writings in general really, from all across the diaspora; some I've heard of, some names I don't know. Fiction, poetry, memoir, essays, all types, you name it. He says that as a Black boy growing up in Minnesota, he felt like an "endangered species"; then his father gave him a copy of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, the first book he fell in love with, and as he grew older he kept discovering others, from the old school to the new school. He has almost everybody in his collection, names I know and don't know. James Alan McPherson, Ishmael Reed, Michael S. Harper, Clarence Major, Kambon Obayani, John Wideman, Robert Fleming, Jupiter Hammon, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes, Sterling Brown, Ernest Gaines, Amos Tutuola, Amiri Baraka, Walter Mosley, Claude McKay, Henry Dumas, Samuel R. Delany, Martin Delany, Olaudah Equiano, Ronald Fair, Rudolph Fisher, Leon Forrest, Sam Greenlee, John A. Williams, George Moses Horton, George Schuyler, Albert Murray, Don

Steele, J. A. Rogers, Robert Hayden, Haki Madhubuti, Dudley Randall, Eric Walrond, Henry Van Dyke, Malcolm X . . . among many others . . .

He even has unpublished manuscripts by every type of Black man, including some incarcerated men, who found out by some means of his collection of books by Black men and sent him copies of their books and manuscripts, fiction, memoirs, poetry, and plays.

In fact, his collection of books and broadsides and manuscripts by Black men authors takes up our whole library at our home in Detroit and even the hallways. I keep my women authors' books in the attic, which I have turned into a library. Once my husband came up to the attic and thought he would be entering a space "for colored girls only," and then discovered that I had books by women of every color, race, creed, and nationality. He started fingering some of the books. I peeked up from my peacock chair and my own reading to glimpse who he was looking at: Carlene Hatcher Polite, Marguerite Duras, Ruby Zagoren, Margaret Randall, Joan Didion, Isabel Allende, Ann duCille, and a few others.

"What's this one about?" he asked.

"It's about a modern-day Black female picara—she's from the lower classes but moves about among people of different levels of society and different races and nationalities. She also sort of got the idea from James Joyce's HCE."

"Say what?"

"You know, 'Here Comes Everybody.' Joyce's expression in one of his books. She was a fan of James Joyce, and even took a course on Joyce when she was in college from the widow of Randall Jarrell, the famous poet."

"Say who?"

"Randall Jarrell. Well, anyway the woman, the lead character, in the book's a bit of a rogue, you know, like the old picaros and picaras of the Spanish tradition."

"Who's Kelly Brown?" he asks, picking up another book.

"That's the title of the book, not the author."

"The woman on the cover is blue."

"She's supposed to be biracial, a woman born of an interracial affair in Kentucky in the old days when interracial relationships were against the law, you know, and then she likewise marries outside of her race. The book's about her adventures and misadventures . . ."

"So it says," he says, looking at the blurb on the back. "And who's Ruby Zogaren?"

"Zagoren. Her book is called *Venture for Freedom*; it's a slave-narrative novel, but she's a Jewish woman."

I know he noticed the book because there's a Black man on the cover. The subtitle is "The True Story of an African Yankee."

He opens the book and starts reading sections aloud:

"'When first plunging into the research necessary for writing *Venture for Freedom*, I did not realize how many individuals would help in the unremitting search for historical facts. My husband . . . '" Then he plunges into the book: "'In the forest of Guinea in West Africa, near a small village, a boy was tracking lion spore . . . '"

"Venture Smith was a real person," I comment.

"I know. That's what it says here. She's got a different last name from her husband."

"I know. I met her daughter when I was visiting a friend at Connecticut College. She's the one who gave me a copy of the book; I mean the friend. We were all sitting at the Black table, you know how we did in those days, and this white girl came up and sat down, and people didn't seem to notice her presence except for me. There was another white-looking girl at the table who turned out to be Black, so I wasn't sure what this one's identity was either. Both had Jewish last names. And then my friend introduced her, and when we got back to her

dorm room she gave me a copy of Ms. Zagoren's book and also a copy of a poem by her daughter that had been published in *The Nation* when she was still a schoolgirl."

He puts the book down and picks up another, by a Latina.

"I met her at Connecticut College also. She's from the Dominican Republic. She was still a young girl. She and my friend were both students of June Jordan, you know, the Black woman poet, who was filling in for a poet named William Meredith when he was on sabbatical, I think. You know, they were just beginning to hire Black professors. Some of those colored girls had never had Black professors before. Unlike myself. Anyway, I met a lot of writers when I was a student, writers and future writers of every type and description. I met more writers than I did artists. You introduced me to Dudley Randall, who founded Broadside Press. You remember."

"Of course. You adore writers more than artists anyway. You don't have to compete with them."

"You were telling him about that prisoner who had sent you some of his writings. And then you were thinking of following Mr. Randall's lead and setting up your own publishing company to publish all those manuscripts you were collecting. You wanted his advice. He seemed like a good sort. I mean, Mr. Randall. I liked him."

"And who's Zona Gale?"

I tell him.

"Who's Carlene Hatcher Polite?"

"That's Toni Morrison's cousin, someone told me. I was sitting on this wall at grad school outside the dorm reading Toni Morrison, and someone walked by and tossed up to me a copy of a book by Carlene Hatcher Polite, and said she was Toni Morrison's cousin. I didn't know if she was signifying or meaning her real honest-to-goodness cousin. It's a very experimental type book. I read them both. I think even you'd like Carlene Hatcher Polite."

"I like her name." He thumbs through the other book. "This picara sounds a bit like you."

I say nothing.

"'Here Comes Everybody' is right. They should call you HCE. And you're a bit of a rogue yourself. You've got every imaginable female up here. It's a bit crowded, don't you think? I notice you don't have any artwork by women artists, not even your own."

Then he stands among Native American female authors and fingers my dream catcher.

"So this is your dream catcher."

Then he's among the Latinas again. Then he lifts up a book by Mary Barber and stands among the Irish female writers.

"I guess I never really thought about Irish women writers. I didn't know there were so many Irish female writers. I know all the men of course. I think I read Mary McCarthy, but she's Irish American, isn't she?"

He goes among the "colored girls" again and picks up Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble.*

"That's the first Alice Walker book I ever read," I said. "She came to our school and gave a reading. She was supposed to give a lecture but forgot her notes, and so gave a reading instead. She read from that book. My professor introduced us. She thought I was a writer, a poet maybe. Alice Walker, I mean. But I told her I was an art student. But I was taking courses in African American literature from this professor, and some of us students were introduced to her."

He muses a moment, replaces *In Love and Trouble*, then gives me some papers to sign, why he came up to the attic in the first place. Some sort of new homeowner's insurance policy form that we both had to sign.

Then he's drawn to another book with a Black man on the cover.

"Who's this?"

"He's supposed to be a private detective, part African American and part Russian. A sort of satire on the detective genre. There are a series of stories. That's the same author who wrote *Kelly Brown*. And that's some science fiction. I guess they call it Afrofuturism now. That section is all her books. When she wrote that it was the 1950s, though. Her real first name is Electra, but they used to tease her when she was a child and call her Electricity. So she started using her second name as her first name. Her father's Hawaiian. Spanish and Hawaiian. Her mother's African American and Irish. That's a childhood memoir over there and there's a family history.

"Her grandfather founded one of those little freetowns.

"That one was called Warthumtown. It wasn't just an all-Black town, though. They had some white people and some Mexicans and some Native American families too. But it was owned by Blacks, a free Black founded the town."

"You've got a whole section."

"Yah. Those are the indie authors over there. I've got whole sections on them. And I've got my own collection of manuscripts too."

"It's really tight up here. You're really crowded."

"It's my cocoon."

"What about the movie extra? Has she never had a speaking part?" I'm asking now. "When you called her your friend, I thought it was going to be a man. Are she and the poet lovers?"

"No, they had just met that night."

"They could still be lovers."

"No, she's never had a speaking role. But there's not a movie set in the Caribbean that I haven't seen her in. She loves playing extras in Caribbean scenes, and they love to have her. I think she was even in a James Bond movie as a little girl, somewhere in the background."

I try to remember what movies set in the Caribbean that I've seen her in. I try to remember James Bond. I try to remember a little girl or a grown woman. Carrying a tray of seafood? Dancing on a table or the beach? Lounging in the sand? Riding the white sea horses up from the sea? She has one of those familiar faces. An everywoman's face.

"And the poet? Tell me one of his poems."

Shuger recites:

Change confirms the truth of change
In an exotic setting
Where love is many colored

And then he recites more poems. He has one of those sorts of memories, both auditory and photographic. Poems of moons, stars, boats, sea turtles, the sea itself, caverns, awakened birds, more stars, silence, ecstasy and dreams, and here and there are cocoa beans, mango, and bamboo.

5.

Inside the forest house, Shuger and I make love.

From the open window, the moon's so bright. I nest against him like a sea turtle and wonder if the ocean ever sleeps. In a dream, I play a movie extra, but it's an old silent movie.

When I'm half awake, the sun strides through the window shouting up up up get up! I shower in a wooden shower stall, but I'd expected a cruder, older one. Nothing so modern. I can smell the lavender from the shaving soap.

"Are they lovers?" I insist.

"No, they're married."

"So you lied when you said they'd just met."

"It's a private joke."

"That's no joking matter."

"He says whenever he's with her, it's always like he's meeting her for the first time. She almost never speaks. I've almost never heard a peep from her. It's like she's a movie extra in her own life too."

"Have they been married for a long time?"

"Rather long."

"Maybe they know each other too well. Do they have kids?"

"Several."

"Aha!"

I wash my hair. I imagine their children as little movie extras, running about or riding seahorses. But he says their kids are grown-ups now. Grown children. Not little ones.

6.

From the window, I see Shuger, dressed and walking through the forest toward the beach. He's carrying one of his books. *Island of Song? Symbolism and Modernity? Images of Kin?* The odor of aftershave mixed with peppermint toothpaste lingers. I arrive on the beach with buttered rolls and melons.

After breakfast, the two of us walk the shoreline. Out to sea are fishermen in tiny bamboo-colored boats. Some drag in nets; others hold poles or harpoons. Real harpoons. Not Raymond Barrow's harpoons of light. I've never seen real harpoons before, not even from a distance.

There used to be pirates all along these coasts, says Shuger. I mishear him.

It sounds like he said, "There used to be pirates all along these coats." Then I hear him right.

"Oh, yeah? Suppose there are now? I saw this news story about modern-day pirates. Drug smugglers."

"I suppose," he says, matter-of-factly. "But this isn't the Bahamas."

I picture Shuger and me as two pirates. Not modern-day pirates, but pirates of the old days.

Buccaneers. The fishermen look so small in the ocean. But we, Shuger and I, must look equally small to them. Or perhaps smaller.

He sits on the sand, opens a book, and begins to read.

7.

At the edge of the beach, a woman is breaking stones. The dress she wears is cactus green; sunlight dances on her hammer.

"Why is she breaking stones?" I ask Shuger.

Shug doesn't answer right away, as if he's pondering the question, or thinks I'm ignorant for asking.

"All she does all day is break stones," he says finally. "It earns her a living."

He returns to reading.

I picture her from sunset to sunrise, breaking stones. I picture a whole island of stone breakers. Men, women, children. They get up early to go break stones.

The wind ruffles my hair. I hand him a melon. We eat juicy melons. I watch the woman break stones. I'm so thirsty I could swallow the whole ocean.

"Maybe she won't sell them," I muse. "Maybe she'll just use them to build her own cottage."

"She'll sell them," he says. "The masons buy from her."

That's how they
Turn stones into bread

8.

I sit on the sand and listen to the rhythm of the stone breaker. I don't dare speak to her. Although we're the same color, she knows I'm not of this island. I tell myself I don't speak because I don't want to break the rhythm of her stone breaking. Shug has returned to the forest house, but I stay to listen to the woman breaking stones and to watch the seahorses rise higher and the men in their boats rise with them. I watch the sea turtle. Is it still the same one?

Shug has told me about them, the sea turtles. They come to lay their eggs in the sand. They lay their eggs in a shallow layer of sand, and so the eggs are ripe for predators.

"Why don't they lay them in deeper sand?" I asked.

"Because the eggs are too fragile for deeper sand," he answered.

And when the tiny turtles are born, they make their way toward the sea. If the seabirds don't get them. If the seabirds don't get them, they return to the sea.

"Would you rather be a seabird or a tortoise?" I asked.

"It's not a tortoise; it's a turtle," he replied. "They're not the same."

"What's the difference?" I asked.

"The tortoise is strictly a land dweller."

"And the other one, does the other one dwell strictly at sea?"

He didn't reply. Then he said the word "terrapin." Then he talks of tortoises, the giant ones of the Galapagos Islands.

Now I watch the sea turtle scoop out a nest of sand. And then it covers its nest with the thinnest layer of sand. Then it turns seaward. When it reaches the sea, it climbs a white seahorse and rides further out.

I, on shore, watch a seabird land near the turtle's nest. It takes flight as I rise. One fisherman moves inland from the sea, and I climb through sand.

I lift a seashell that has found its way into the forest.

I think of Lamming's sea and then Collymore's.

Caribbean poets form a book that Shuger gave me before we came to this island.

9.

I'm on the beach again, watching the woman break stones. I light a cigarette.

"Give me one," she says.

I rise and give her the whole package.

"Not the whole package, my dear. Just one," she says, as if she's scolding me. She takes one cigarette and returns the package.

"Are you drawing me?" she asks. I show her my sketchbook.

"That's me all right," she says. "You must be very clever to draw so fast. A lot of artists come here. On holiday. But they don't draw so fast. They take their time."

I think she's going to say something else, but she doesn't. She goes on breaking stones.

I close my sketchbook as she poses her hammer over a stone.

"You Shuger's wife, aren't you?" she asks.

I wonder how she knows him and not me. I nod and wait for her to explain how she knows him, but she doesn't. She goes on breaking stones.

10.

I move forward, toward the edge of the sea, trying not to disturb the shallow turtles' nests.

I toss the butt end of my cigarette into the ocean and watch it float in a nest of seaweed. I think it's against the law to toss cigarettes into the sea, but I do so anyway.

Roguish me.

11.

In the pub I sip warm beer.

I ask my husband how the stone breaker knows his name.

"Because I told her. She asked me and I told her."

"Were you chatting her up?"

He ignores me.

"She thought I was a native of the islands. She knew you weren't. But she thought I was."

I finish the beer, and we go swimming in the starlight. We ride the white sea horses. We charge from the ocean into the leaning palms.

Back in the rented house, I dream of a woman somewhere breaking stones.

"I didn't know that people still said 'native,'" I whisper. "Not in this modern day and age."

THE FEMALE ANGEL

The female angel walked across the Seine

—ROMARE BEARDEN

I am the angel that Romare Bearden—or, I should say, I am the female angel that Romare Bearden once claimed he saw in Paris. It must've been around 1950, although this is a purely human conception of time and space. It might have been the Middle Ages in Spain or India, or the time of the Pharaohs in Egypt. It might have been when Kush was an African empire, or the time of the Ethiopian kings. It might have been the time of the Neanderthals or the Cro-Magnons. Perhaps I stood next to a cave artist in Europe, or with Huang-ti of China. Perhaps I was there at the time of Hammurabi's laws. I have known Chinese scholars and Jewish prophets. Was I not there when the Buddha was born, or Confucius? Did Meng-tse the philosopher know me? And what of Asoka of India or Hannibal the Great? Did Cicero know me, or Augustine? What of Attila and Muhammad? Genghis Khan? Kublai Khan? Was I not there when Ignatius of Loyola founded the Society of Jesus? And what of Jesus Himself? Did not Toussaint Louverture know me when he led his revolt, and what of Simón Bolívar? And Jose de San Martin? Did not Gandhi know me? And Jawaharlal Nehru? Did Malcolm ever know me? Or Mandela? Or perhaps I am only the